

LANGUAGE GAMES IN MAGRITTE AND WITTGENSTEIN

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Abstract

The apparently-intrinsic juxtaposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein and René Magritte seems to provide some further clarification for the work of the Austrian philosopher as well as a theoretical framework to the work of the Belgian artist.

What leads Wittgenstein to state that the word “red” has nothing to do with the colour *red*? What leads Magritte to maintain that a pipe “is not a pipe”? They both believe in the centrality of Saussure’s principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, thus supporting a semiotically-oriented solution.

La juxtaposition apparemment intrinsèque entre Ludwig Wittgenstein et René Magritte semble apporter quelques précisions au travail du philosophe autrichien ainsi qu’un cadre théorique pour le travail de l’artiste belge. Qu’est-ce qui conduit Wittgenstein à dire que le mot “rouge” n’a rien à voir avec la couleur *rouge*? Qu’est-ce qui conduit Magritte à dire qu’une pipe “n’est pas une pipe”? Tous les deux croient en la centralité du principe de l’arbitrarité du signe de Saussure, en favorisant ainsi une solution qui est orientée vers le sémiotique.

L’accostamento, apparentemente estrinseco, tra Ludwig Wittgenstein e René Magritte, tende a offrire un’ulteriore chiarificazione dell’opera del filosofo austriaco e a fornire una cornice teorica all’opera dell’artista belge.

Cos’è che fa dire a Wittgenstein che la parola “rosso” non ha nulla a che vedere con il colore rosso e a Magritte che il disegno di una pipa “non è una pipa”? Entrambi assumono come centrale il principio (di matrice saussuriana) dell’*arbitrarietà del segno*, si orientano, cioè, verso soluzioni di tipo “semiotico”.

While, on the one hand, the apparently-intrinsic combination of Ludwig Wittgenstein and René Magritte reveals the double advantage of providing some further clarification of the work of the Austrian philosopher, on the other it provides a theoretical framework to the work of the Belgian artist.

It is a hermeneutical process - as one can guess - that draws on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), a masterpiece in the 20th-century philosophy which brings about a radical change in a perception of language that is far away from the representational outcome of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and more adequate in order to tackle the issues related to artistic languages.

There is no natural connection between an object and the name which represents it: the meaning of a word - as famously stated by Wittgenstein (1953, our translation in English, p. 25) – “is its use in a given language”. This is the disruptive theoretical legacy provided by the analysis of the so-called “second” Wittgenstein. However what is the theoretical substratum that allows us to put into dialogue the Austrian philosopher with Magritte? What leads Wittgenstein to state that the word “red” has nothing to do with the colour *red*? (cf. *ibid*: 42) and Magritte to maintain that a pipe “is not a pipe”? Both of them - one explicitly, the other implicitly - support the central principle of Saussure's *arbitrariness of the language*, i.e. the theory according to which the relationship between an object and the sign that denotes it is “unmotivated” (our translation in English; cf. Saussure 1922, p. 87). Hence, they both support a semiotically-oriented solution.

1. *The arbitrariness of the sign*

It is interesting to observe that the issue of arbitrariness is dealt with in the same years by both Wittgenstein and Magritte. Although there is no evidence of either a direct or indirect acquaintance between the two, Suzi Gablik notes that “the affinity between the concerns of both is so impressive that even the images that occur often correspond” (our translation in English, Gablik 1970, p. 86).

As early as 1933, from the drafting of a few notes that were then collected in two volumes known as *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Paper* - anticipating the *Philosophical* texts – one can notice the change of perspective in Wittgenstein’s thought. By rejecting what he had said in the *Tractatus*, he breaks with the tradition that postulates the correspondence (*naturaliter*) between names and items to state that only by means of the application of a name in a real context of discourse (its *use*) we can grasp its meaning.

In the same years, Magritte’s paints *The Human Condition* (1933), in which he represents the old (Renaissance) question of the painting as a “window on reality”, but resolves it in a whole new way, that is, with the theme of “painting within a painting”: in the picture he depicts a canvas resting on an easel on which the (real?) landscape is painted, and one can see over the window sill. Merging together, canvas and landscape both incorporate the problematic nature of the relationship between reality and representation: if, at first, it seems that the real landscape is depicted through the window, the observer later realizes that even the latter is “fiction”, as it is part of the picture that is being viewed.

Starting from the very first similarity between Wittgenstein and Magritte, the aim of our contribution is therefore to (re)present the two authors from a semiotic perspective, showing how in the production of the philosopher it is possible to identify an “aesthetic” reading and vice versa, i.e. how in artist’s work we can recognise a “philosophical”

reading; however, the objective of our study is to show the extent to which Wittgenstein represents a hermeneutic model for Magritte, and the extent to which Magritte is Wittgenstein's (intersemiotic)¹² further exemplification/translation³.

2. From a picture theory of language to language games, from form to matter

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein is in favour of the so-called "picture theory of language". According to such a theory, language would be nothing but the representation of facts⁴.

The main distinction taking place within a language is between simple and complex propositions: the former representing a state of possible things, the latter deriving from the combination of simple propositions through truth-functional operators⁵. Only these two types of propositions have sense. Complex propositions depend on the elementary ones at their basis, whose sense is in turn given by the fact that they present a state of possible things, i.e. a situation which may happen in the world.

In order to clarify how a sentence represents a fact, Voltolini (1998: 18-19) resorts to an image. Suppose a master of fencing wants to explain his/her students how to make a move and paints two images that represent two fencers: in the sketch by the master one can identify a pose that his/her students can *possibly* assume (a state of possible things). If the two students actually took that position, the sketch would become the accurate, true representation of a state of real things. The Wittgensteinian propositions behave in the same way.

However, in his *Tractatus* Wittgenstein poses another condition for a proposition to represent a fact, that is, the *identity of logical form* between reality and the

proposition. Language and reality are interconnected: the meaning of “names” consists of “simple objects” that are connected and constitute the state of things depicted in the propositions. Logic, therefore, is the mirror image of the world, but with a warning, which sounds a bit like a paradox⁶: it is the condition of significance of any language but cannot be represented since “in order to be able to represent logical form, we should be able to situate ourselves with the proposition outside of the logic, that is, out of the world” (Wittgenstein 1921, our translation in English, p. 24, § 4.031).

The theses contained in the *Tractatus* are here in shorthand and have been immune to critical revisions for several years. A first reshuffle, however, emerges from his *Philosophical Observations* (1929-30), the first document that Wittgenstein wrote after years of silence that followed the publication of his masterpiece in 1921. The language begins to look more like a logical entity and the propositions are not only evaluated as mere representations of facts: the sense of the proposition - the Austrian philosopher states (cf. Wittgenstein 1964) - is its “purpose”. Understanding linguistic expressions - Wittgenstein maintains - does not exclusively depend on the logical domain, but also on the speakers’ “attitude”. The comprehension of the logical structure together with its constant starts to be associated with the concerns about what analytic philosophy called *common speech* and Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, in the ‘60s redefined as “parlare commune” (cf. Rossi-Landi 1961). For the first time we witness the introduction of a new term that is - borrowing Caputo’s terminology - the “matter” of language (see Caputo 2000).

Between 1933 and 1935, on occasion of two university courses, Wittgenstein prepared two notebooks for his students known as *the Blue Book* and the *Brown Book*: here - especially in *the Book Brown* - he introduces the concept

of *Sprachspiele*, i.e. “language games”, according to which language is a “game” and as such it is subject to “rules”. These rules, however, are not comparable to the strict laws of language as calculus. The language, argues the philosopher, is not governed by a strong rationale, but by habits and rules devised by men and as such they are modular and undeterminable⁷.

It is in the *Philosophical Investigations*, however, that one can notice the dissolution of the logical and linguistic system at the basis of the *Tractatus*: we abandon the linguistic ontology, open we now explore routes that will take us to the pragmatics of language. Here follows what we can read in the introduction to his posthumous work published in 1953, two years after his death, and which is to be considered among the most fruitful philosophical innovations of the last century:

Four years ago I had the opportunity to read my first book [the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*] and explain the ideas that were expressed in it. Suddenly I realized that I could publish my old thoughts together with the new ones, and that my new thoughts would emerge only if I put them in contrast with my old way of thinking and against its background (Wittgenstein 1953, our translation in English, p. 4) .

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The criticism against the *Tractatus* is mainly carried out in propositions 1-137 and is articulated as follows (see Voltolini 1998: 11-12):

- §§ 1-64: criticism against the theory of denotation and the representational theory of the meaning of propositions;
- §§ 65-81: introduction to the concept of “family resemblances” between objects that fall under the same concept;
- §§ 81-88: anticipation of the issue of “rule-following”⁸;

- §§ 89-137: criticism against the idea that philosophy should deal with the *essence* of things.

In this way, it seems that Wittgenstein wants to permanently put philosophy aside. Indeed, he gives it a new and difficult task, which is far away from metaphysics, but which is not necessarily less challenging: the task of describing language *as it is*, with the *therapeutic* aim of abandoning the conceptual misunderstandings that we encounter and which cause us to “idle” when we face problems of any kind. It is only through *this* philosophy that we can fight the “enchantment of the intellect”, because *this* is the only philosophy that can “show the fly the way out of the trap” (*ibid.*: 66).

One of the main causes of misunderstanding - Wittgenstein states (*ibid.*: 69) - is the fact that “we do not clearly see the use of words” and that our grammar “lacks of perspicuity”. Philosophy, therefore, has the task of clarifying language, showing the rules of use for a given term and - unexpectedly in tune with the paradigm of differential Structuralism - explaining the *differences* and the *similarities* with the other terms.

Language, as the Austrian philosopher convincingly argues by abandoning the picture theory of language and decreeing the end of (onto)logic identity between the proposition and the fact, has a wide expressive variety, that is determined and irreducible to its merely representative function. The aim of “representing facts” is only *one* of the functions of language, which are governed, rather, by a participatory approach that embraces the determined and the undetermined, the accuracy of the calculation and the ambiguity of speech, the logical and the pre-logical, the precise and the vague, the intensive and the extensive, as Louis Hjelmslev would say⁹.

The criticism of Wittgenstein’s theory of denotation is not indiscriminate. Since the first propositions of

its *Investigations* criticizing St. Augustine and the theory of ostensive definition, Wittgenstein asserts that “Augustine describes [...] a system of communication; however, not all that we call language belongs to such a system” (*ibid.*: 10). Hence, Wittgenstein does not reject the idea of denotation from the facts of language, but he merely demonstrates it is inadequate. Languages, in fact, have many features which are not just denotative: had it not been so, speakers would probably not fall into (frequent) episodes of misunderstanding and languages would not be ambiguous (ambiguity being their hallmark). However, though assuming that the denotation was the only function of language, “saying, ‘every word [...] designates something’ we have not yet said *anything* at all” (*ibid.*: 17). In fact, even if we allowed all words to have a reference and semantic differences to be descended exclusively from their reference to different things, such a reference would derive from the evidence that terms are *used* in different ways. This explains why the meaning of a given expression is the use we make of it, not its referent. That is why the word “red” has nothing to do with the colour “red”.

3. *The betrayal of images*

Renè Magritte, the surrealist painter disinclined to labels and roles, represents, on the one hand - as we shall see below - a *thinking* way of painting which provides us with factual reflections in the field of semiotics and philosophy of the language; from the other - as we say at the end of our study - a sort of test of Wittgenstein's theoretical elaboration.

Luciano Ponzio states (2010: 154):

In Magritte's paintings the general intent is to cast doubt on the reductive cultural habits, on the visual habits associated with symbolic sign, with the “thirdness” (following Peirce's terminology), that is, with the conventional, with what is

usually assumed as the “real”, what is not necessarily the way it is (the indexical, the “secondness”, our translation in English).

On the contrary, L. Ponzio continues, it is the “urgent [...]transition to the iconic, the firstness, the possible, and therefore innovation, inventiveness, re-creation” (*ibid.*) of the visions of world:

In Magritte, this takes place by means of a standard representation, with the fully realistic precision of familiar objects which are part of our everyday life, but which produce a “surprise” effect, thanks to the way they are combined, assembled together, or to the relationship they have with a sentence, with the framework, or with its title [...]; they thus generate a paradox. In such a process, the context plays a pivotal role. The effect of “alienation” - to borrow an expression from the Russian formalists - is rendered through the strangeness of the report, of the position, of the connection in which we discover what may appear to be obvious, clear, normal (*ibid.*, our translation in English).

Like Wittgenstein, also Magritte intends to break the tie that binds the object to the sign. Magritte’s conception about the possibility of an object to be depicted begins to develop thanks to a series of paintings that has as its pilot painting *The betrayal of images* and its later versions. As is well known, the details change according to the version: the first painting represents a pipe with the inscription “this is not a pipe”; the painting is then reproduced with a change in its details and by increasing the sense of uncertainty that the observation of the picture initiates. As noted by Foucault (see 1978), we move from the bewilderment given by the simplicity of the first version, to the confusion coming from the many questions following the observation of one of the latest versions which represent the same pipe with the same inscription, but enclosed in a frame, above which is another pipe suspended in the air.

“Who could smoke a pipe in my picture? - asks Magritte. No one. So IT IS NOT A PIPE” (Magritte 1979 our translation in English, p. 214)¹⁰. In fact, after an initial disorientation, what appears to be a paradox is resolved by a reflection that leads us to determine that the object represented is not a pipe, but its *image*: “for those who can read – we agree with L. Ponzio - writing does not illustrate the word, and the word is not the caption of the image” (L. Ponzio 2010: 76):

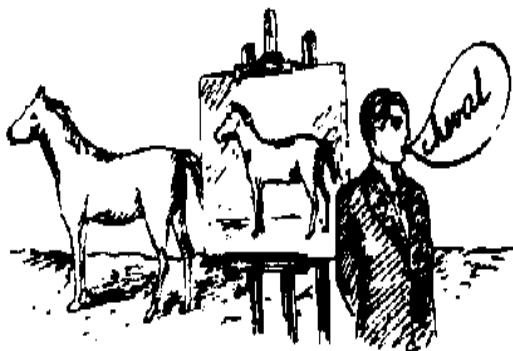
The strange combination in which the painting represents the objects - because, they are realistically, conventionally, precisely, meticulously represented, to be prototypes - like the images accompanying definitions in a dictionary or that are generally used in order to learn to read a primer - makes them get out of the familiar context in which we are more likely to see them and in which they appear as ordinary, banal, by putting them in a new context, i.e. the framework [...].

The easy reading of each element that is realistically represented in the framework as part of the “already-seen” and therefore immediately recognizable, is accompanied by the novelty of an unsettling reading that is more concerned with the environment, the space, and the way in which the objects that are represented are assembled (ibid.: 154, our translation in English).

The correspondence between the object and its meaning disappears: a word, as in the case of Wittgenstein; an image, as in the case of Magritte. The Belgian artist therefore shares Wittgenstein’s thesis that the signs are arbitrary and do not possess any (ontological) bond of referentiality with the things.

One should bear in mind that to Magritte there are three cognitive levels: *reality* (the level belonging to the daily weft of conventions), *sub-reality* (the level perceived in a dream), *surreality* (released by the banal sense). The purpose of Magritte’s painting will thus be to *bring the real to the surreal*,

that is, to leave behind conventions and show its mystery. This explains the gap between image and idea, between the object and its representation. The offset of the plans, following Magritte, is even more fragmented. The levels are varied and Magritte provides a list contained in *Words and Pictures* published in 1929 (see Magritte 1979: 52-53). The illustration proposed by the artist which best exemplifies the diversity of the levels is the one in which we have the image of a horse, the painting of a horse on a canvas and the word "horse" uttered by a man, accompanied by the following caption: "An object never fulfils the same tasks as its name or its image" (*ibid.*: 52-53).



The arbitrariness, as Magritte argues, is commonly accepted because it belongs to a network of habits and conventions that are part of reality.

Conversely, in the painting *The Key to Dreams* (1930), Magritte reveals the conventional nature of the linguistic sign, by representing four objects with no connection between one another, with the some names which do not correspond to the object described by the caption, if not in the last case. In this way, Magritte emphasizes the autonomy

of the image and the conventionality of the sign which, if not disclosed, may drop into the kind of mistakes which make us believe that the image of a pipe *is* a pipe (i.e. that there is a correlation between image and object). According to Magritte, on the contrary, an image can *stand for* any object, and the same can be said for names. For this reason he can arbitrarily redistribute verbal descriptions and pictorial representations so that the captions do not match the images. To sum up, Magritte's paintings resort to what Wittgenstein calls "language games".

From *The words and images* some theoretical reflections also emerge that reveal the similarity between the philosopher and the artist. In Wittgenstein's view, learning a language does not mean knowing the names, and the use of words is determined by rules that are to be found in certain "forms of life" (*Lebensform*) flowing from specific human "activities". To Magritte, representations function similarly: in order to represent an object, an image must entertain relations with it, it should not resemble it: "Sometimes the name of an object stands for an image. A word can take the stand for an object in reality. An image can stand for a word in a sentence" (*ibid.*), says the painter. Anything can stand for an object if there is – in Wittgenstein's words - *consensus of use*.

In the painting *The proper meaning* (1928-29), the words "femme triste" replace the face of a sad woman, demonstrating that the similarity is an accessory element - certainly not necessary - of the reference. The same thing happens in *Man on his way to the horizon* which depicts a man's shoulders surrounded by a few spots that bear the words: gun, chair, horse, clouds, horizon. In this painting - Foucault notes - there is something more than *the proper sense*. Here the words simply replace the face, they do not replace absent objects, they do not occupy empty spaces, but bulky masses that otherwise would not give the

impression of what they represent (see Foucault 1978: 55-56). Here the arbitrariness of the relationship between image / word / object is celebrated.

Notwithstanding this, there is another emblematic painting in this regard: *The Alphabet of Revelations* (1928). It consists of two panels: the first is a representation of four objects (a pipe, a bird, a key, a leaf), the second is a twisted wire. Here it seems that everything obeys the laws of plastic representation and it seems that the words do not creep. However, on closer inspection, one can notice a tear in the canvas showing that those are just figures that are well separated from the legend accompanying them (the twisted wire is actually a tangle of terms). The report of the things with their designation is put at risk.

Such problems also occur in the case of portraits, where the referent is right there, in front of the painter, who cannot “miss” the object. Instead, in this case too, the claims of the subject are not satisfied. There is a 1937 painting, *Reproduction prohibited*, in which Magritte skillfully demonstrates the impossibility of the painting by proposing a character depicted from its back in front of a mirror which, instead of reflecting the face, represents once again his back:

The character that is portrayed portrays him/herself [...]. While the portrait should return to better represent, enhance, beautify his patron through strategies of adjustments – as this is the historical origin of the portrait –, on the other hand, as an art [...] the painting faithfully depicts the figure, and in each portrait the face will re-turn, turning elsewhere, never conforming to its model (L. Ponzio 2010: 96, our translation in English).

The same can be said for the self-portrait, in which the artist is apparently the master of himself, but in reality he is unable to capture his own identity, which *retracts* and (re)turn. The

identity is beyond our control to ourselves as we have not no power on the self.

Magritte's painting, "by exaggerating to parody, loyalty and high precision with respect to 'reality', it ridicules any attempt to represent objects 'as they are'" (*ibid.*), including their identity. The object "harms the painting" (*ibid.*) and the relationship between the things and their designation is dissolved.

At this point it becomes easier to understand the relationship between the Belgian painter and the Austrian philosopher: rather than a juxtaposition, their combination is revealed in its nature of successful theoretical relationship.

While to Wittgenstein names are not pictures of reality, analogously Magritte does not consider pictorial representations as a mirror of reality. If Wittgenstein makes use of the well-known theory of "language games" to explain the way language works, Magritte makes constant use of "visual games" and "aesthetic games", in order to demonstrate the dissolution of the ontological link between sign and referent. Indeed, if by language we do not mean the ability to speak but - borrowing the term from the biosemiotics field (see Sebeok 1991; Ponzio-Petrilli 2008) - the ability to "shape" reality, seeing in the language as a "training device" species-specific of the human animal that exists even in the absence of speech, there will be no difficulty to consider the Magritte's paintings as real "language games". If - as Augusto Ponzio argues - "the human sign is language" (cf. Ponzio 1998: 134) and all the manifestations (literature, painting, music, etc.) of human communication can be referred to as *languages* or "interpretant" of the language as a training device, also the "visual" games by the Belgian painter are to be considered as "language".

Wittgenstein and Magritte both working to combat the "enchantment" of language, by showing how the process of

denomination and representation are complex processes which require more than a mere reflection between object and image or name, and although Magritte is oriented towards the “social criticism” of conventions (paradigmatic in this regard is the *Red model* in which he denounces the human habit of putting on shoes as “monstrous”) and Wittgenstein remains in a horizon of philosophical reflection, the convergence of their paths is, on the one hand, very clear; on the other, it is theoretically fruitful, by proposing both a solution to the problem of semiotic meaning¹¹ and a hermeneutic model for the paintings of the artist, as well as further examples and explanations of the new theory formulated by the philosopher.

(transl. from Italian by Laura Centonze)

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¹ By inter-semiotic translation or “transmutation” we mean – following Jakobson’s terminology – “the interpretation of linguistic [verbal] signs by means of a non-linguistic [non-verbal] sign system (cf. Jakobson 1966: 57, our translation in English) and vice versa.

² It is interesting to note, among other things, that the positions of Wittgenstein and Magritte in relation to their own areas of interest may be seen as symmetrical, or better say, similar but reversed. While Wittgenstein is a philosopher who is often intolerant towards philosophy and its teaching but loves painting, architecture and music, Magritte is a painter who refuses the role of the artist and describes “painting” as “a bad word” which refers to “the heaviness and the pretentiousness” (cf. L. Ponzio 2010: 103), preferring to be referred to as “the thinking man”. Two parallel biographies that ideally meet in the rejection of encoded roles, i.e. philosopher for Wittgenstein, artist for Magritte.

³ Wittgenstein talks about “depiction” (cf. propositions 2.1513, 2.1514), by considering it a synonym of the term “representation”. Nonetheless, in light of some further developments in the field of semiotics, it would be useful to draw a distinction between the two concepts. In the depiction, “signs do not just *stand for* something else, but *they are* at the same time *with* something else that somehow escapes their representation, they do not only represent but they depict” (Caputo, 2004: 12). Here, however, we shall use the term “depiction” as described by Wittgenstein.

⁴ Connectives that allow us to combine simple sentences are conjunctions such as “and”, “but”, phrases such as “if, then”, “if and only if” and so forth. For instance, given two propositions p and q , one can construct the complex proposition “if p then q ”.

⁵ On the broad and complex issue of the paradox of language we refer to Garroni 1986 and its careful critical reconsideration of his text in Caputo 2013.

⁶ On the relationship between language, thought and language games, compare Dell'Atti 2013: 83-85.

⁷ On the issue of “regularity” in reference to language and creativity we should consider Garroni’s *Creativity*, where the Italian philosopher examines and endorses the Wittgenstein’s theory, by comparing - as suggested by the Austrian philosopher in his *Philosophical Investigations* - the linguistic activity with the conditions it requires [...] for the activity and conditions of the game” (Garroni [1978] 2010: 104); it is not in a game devoid of “legality”: “a game without any rules - as language - writes Garroni by directly borrowing Wittgenstein’s terminology (2010: 105) - would not be a strange game, but it is not at all a game”. “Creativity” - a typical feature of language, both for the “second” Wittgenstein and Garroni – is undocked from “legality” and would only be “a *flatus vocis*”(ivi: 133).

⁸ In order to understand the issue in a more detailed way, compare Caputo 2010a.

⁹ The titles of the paintings by Magritte that are chosen in order to disorientate the viewer, “are chosen - writes the Belgian artist - in such a way as to prevent to locate my paintings in a region that could underestimate their scope” (Magritte 1979:100, our translation in English).

¹⁰ Giorgio Cortenova writes, perhaps exaggerating: “semiotically speaking, the work by Magritte appears as a real ‘treaty’, in line with the postulates of de Saussure” (see Cortenova, 1991: 7). What is interesting for our studies, however, is not to see how this sort of “crypto-semiotics” Magritte can stand the comparison of systematisations and theories, but, on the contrary, to provide the latter a further “ordeal” so as to extend its scope. On the notion of “crypto-semiotics”, compare Caputo 2010b: 108-115.